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# Hooray for Hollywood: Onomastic Techniques in Bemelmans' Dirty Eddie

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HOORAY FOR HOLLYWOOD:  
ONOMASTIC TECHNIQUES IN BEMELMANS' *DIRTY EDDIE*

Leonard R.N. Ashley

A New York actress has just got back to Broadway after a year in Hollywood. She says she has been so long among the false fronts and papiermache mansions on the set that nowadays she finds herself sneaking a look at her husband to see if he goes all the way round or is just a profile.

Sir P.G.Wodehouse, *Performing Flea*

Curs, canine or human, tend to bite the hand that feeds them. Therefore it is not surprising that a lot of satirical barbs have been flung by writers at the dream factories of Hollywood where so many of them have labored. There is a long list of obscure plays about Tinsel Town: **Hey Diddle Diddle** (Cormack), **Schoolhouse on the Lot** (Fields and Chodorov), **The Greatest Find Since Garbo** (Birchard and Bard), **On Location** (Wiley), **Dearly Beloved** (Beahan and Buckner), **Kiss the Boys Goodbye** (Boothe), **Hollywood Be Thy Name** (Fagan), **Stars in Your Eyes** (McEvoy), and the list goes on. Some few plays on this subject are still remembered: the Spewacks' **Boy Meets Girl** is one and Kaufman and Connolly's **Merton of the Movies** (based on a story by Harry Leon Wilson) is another. Fiction has done better: think of Evelyn Waugh's **The Loved One**, Nathanael West's **The Day of the Locust** for the mood of the town, and **What Makes Sammy Run?** by Bud Schulberg for the methods of The Industry.

Writers were willing to exploit Hollywood if not to extoll it. "Millions are to be grabbed out here and your only competition is idiots," Ben Hecht telegraphed back east after arriving in the mid-Twenties. "Don't let this get around." William Goldman in **Adventures in the Screen Trade** (1988) says the "single most important fact" about Hollywood is (and he puts it in capital letters) "NOBODY KNOWS ANYTHING."

But here, as I examine satirical names in a work set in Hollywood, I want to concentrate on the onomastic aspects more than on whether the genial barbs are deserved or not deserved. For the dirty linen of Hollywood, you'd have to go somewhere else than the novel **Dirty Eddie** (1947) by Ludwig Bemelmans (1898 – 1962).

Bemelmans wanted to be a painter and claimed that he wrote his more than 40 books simply because he suffered from insomnia. However, the world, which he regarded as "a curiosity," always seemed to be presenting him with wonderfully wacky characters and hilarious situations, and the world of Hollywood was particularly colorful. The book he wrote about Hollywood makes it clear that Bemelmans did far more than record the lives of the *gamine* Madeleine (in his famous children's books) or the eccentrics of **Hotel Splendide**. The satirical names in **Dirty Harry** are proof that he consciously invented and that his book is an artistic creation: comic, trenchant, a carefully contrived study of overpaid actresses, underpaid screenwriters, and overbearing and over-reaching directors in the capital of fantasy.

Himself an Austrian immigrant, Bemelmans was amused by the names of the talents that had flocked to Hollywood when the American golden west came to overshadow the European movie centres. For **Dirty Harry** he invents Vanya Vashvily, "not the run of insensible producers" but a kind and talented man who, on the side, writes pop songs such as "Lost is Love," "Bird of Paradise," and "Au Revoir at the Gare St.-Lazare." For that Vashvily uses the name Danny Spellbinder, which manages to sound both Jewish and self-promoting while hiding both his religion and his shyness. Also at the grandly-named Olympia Studios are Vogel-sang ("famous composer of background music"), Moses Fable (fabulous Jewish studio head, "last of a race of mammoth men"), Wolfgang Leibstod ("head of our musical department"), and Raoul de

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Bourgraff (“head of the art department”). The last can build you a full-size Gare St.-Lazare and, if necessary, transform it overnight into the La Salle railroad station of Chicago. There are also Sandor Thrilling (a director of the Hungarian persuasion), Bob Evervess (bubbling darling of the “story department”), Mr. Envelope (“of the legal end”), and such screen writers as the efficient Valerie Sinnot, the dashing Maurice Cassard, and Ludlow Mumm. Mumm is a bearded left-winger from a sleazy New York pad in the Hotel Wolff (a room of one’s own, on West 44th Street) who is lured to Hollywood to write and does not put a word on paper. Still he is “the great writer.” Everyone and everything in Hollywood is “great”; it makes everyone feel more confident. His very assimilated forename and the surname which may promise champagne but really means “silence” are perfect.

Ludlow Mumm rapidly acquires an agent, Arty Wildgans of the Wildgans Chase or wild-goose-chase agency. He gets a secretary who is a first-rate manager (Miss Princip), a script to work on (**Will You Marry Me?**), and a star to adapt it to. First that is a policeman’s daughter from Chicago named Marie O’Neill; she is renamed Belinda and groomed as a “Serena Blandish” type. But she is replaced by her own discovery: a black piglet (she calls him “Dirty Harry”) whom she finds in the road.

Mumm meets the dependable hackwriter (Jerome Hack), the agent Al Leinwand (“head of a hawk on a sparrow body”), actors such as the leading man Buddy van der Lynn and Sir Gerald Graveline (a “distinguished actor” on his last legs). He meets the silent-movie queen Betsy Allbright, “one of the uncrowned queens of Hollywood,” now on her fourth husband, the manly and phoney Lt. Casey McMahon. He also has dealings with the piglet Belladonna (“a professional with some stage experience” that gets into the act when Dirty Harry’s representatives get demanding) and a host of chauffeurs and butlers and other attendants with names such as Joe, Ernie, Walter, George, Tom, August, and (most unusual) Arthur Nightwine.

But Arthur is unusual, too; he is not just a perfect butler but a retired thief – and he has a script he wants you to read. An unusual character deserves an unusual name, and in this group it has to be very unusual to stand out from the others.

There are a lot of other characters around the fringes of this strange society in which memorable names serve as a kind of crowd-control device, as in the works of Dickens. There’s a florist (Mr. Nircassio) and a prostitute with “a small clientele” (Beverly, who winds up as Mrs Copfree and retires from business) and “Nighty” Nightingale (a young man who has “lit up the garden” for one of Betsy Allbright’s cheap but lavish parties). The names fly, and create an atmosphere of multi-ethnic bustle. Sometimes a real name is not known in this superficial society and, for example, a woman at a party is described as resembling Chancellor Hindenberg – you remember him? before Hitler – in drag. She is “Mrs. Hindenberg” to a cruel observer.

The social status of characters and their familiarity or unfamiliarity with “the right places” is tested by the restaurants they frequent: Romanoff’s and Chasen’s on The Coast, The Colony or The Stork Club in New York, Fouquet’s in Paris. They are also pigeon-holed by where they live. People who live in Santa Barbara are described as “Barbarians.”

A large cast demands economical characterization. You can use the names of the places they shop to tick them off (May Company or Sak’s Fifth Avenue in New York) or the names of the painters whose work adorns their walls (Braque, Vlaminck, Utrillo), even the names of the piano they play (Blüthner) or the soda they drink (Dr. Brown’s Celery Tonic) or the hospitals they go to (Cedars of Lebanon, “The Mayos,” meaning the Mayo Brothers’ clinic in Minnesota). Mumm on arrival treats himself to top-brand cigars; when he leaves, he regretfully ignores “the Cuban corner” of the showcase and is forced “back to the Robert Burns Panatelas.”

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All these names demand that the reader bring extra-literary information to the deciphering of the full meaning of the text, but that is some part of the appeal, “the shock of recognition” as one critic once described it, a kind of intellectual snob appeal not altogether unrelated to the snob appeal of some of the names the reader has to treat as puzzles to be solved.

You know someone is left-wing if he is reading **PM**, the **Daily Worker**, and the **American-Soviet Review**, and humor arises from Mumm leaving the desk where he does nothing to show solidarity with workers on a picket line. The names of these periodicals have to ring a bell with the reader as do nicknames (Cassard calls everyone *amigo*, though he is French), the cars people drive (Ford, Cadillac, Lagonda), the places they publish (“You must do a profile for **The New Yorker**. A serial for **Redbook**. Or visit a foreign country. The **Saturday Evening Post** is sending you to Peking”), and, of course, the movies they make. The movies include **The Hound of the Baskervilles** and **The Count of Monte Cristo**, the silent **Snowy Night** and the western **Two-Gun Lucy**, and **The Mountain King**, which is about Ludwig II of Bavaria (whom they seem to have mixed up with a heterosexual forebear) and Lola Montez. There is also mention of **Er Riecht Nach Knoblauch**, “an old European film ...that had a pig in its cast,” and **The Mount**, which is a life of Christ, otherwise described as “something in Galilean homespun.” My favorite is **Carnival in Bombay**, formerly **Week End in Calcutta**, formerly **A Tale of Two Cities**, the title-changing commenting on production problems and slapdash solutions in Hollywood studios.

The characters in the novel are acutely aware of making a name for themselves, of living on the street with the right name (such as Chrysanthemum Drive), of keeping their names before the public, and of the many ways in which names or substitutes function. A writer may be “the Idiot at the end of the corridor.” A piglet is described as “an actor.” A night with a prostitute is put on the expense account as “research.” A female worker in a wartime factory is “Rosie, the riveter.” Billy Rose (a stenographer turned impresario) here is nameless, dismissed as the perpetrator of “underwater pageants.” The moguls at rival studios are “them.”

One has to become a real name and get that name into the head of the studio head and thence into the **Hollywood Reporter** and the public consciousness. It begins with getting noticed by Moses Fable, who may call other Jewish magnates at the carefully-unnamed rival studio “Kikes,” but you had best not do so.

Even the furniture has names. Mumm rejoices in “an intelligent piece of furniture,” a self-adjusting chair called “King of Ease.” He lives in a world of strange names and the author writes:

Mumm shook hands without surprises. In a town that contains firms like Utter McKinley, the undertakers; a real estate firm of Read and Wright; two Prinzmetals; a LeRoy Prinz; a Jack Skirball; a Jerry Rothschild; a law firm by the name of Dull and Twist; and musicians called Amphitheatrof and Bakaleinakoff, he had become accustomed to unusual and distinctive names (p.75).

These real names are attributable, of course, to the fact that movie people who do not appear on screen except in the credits (musicians, choreographers, costumers, directors and such) could, like people in regular life, keep their real names. A performer needed something like “Dolores Tarrant,” though preferably something more “serious” than the names given to a maharajah’s feline pets (Kitty Cat, Pussy Cat, and Mike).

Real names also appear as “scenery”: Wilshire Boulevard, Sunset Boulevard, Topanga Beach, Coldwater Canyon, Bel Air, Beverly Hills, Malibu, Palm Springs – each and every one with resonances of its own. Hoping to appear quite real are names such as X’Isle (a hideway), and familiarity is revealed in such nicknames as “the Chief” (meaning the Super Chief, from the days when people went west by train). The

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fiction is bolstered by mention of real people: “the Armours of Chicago,” Arthur Freed and Louis B. Mayer’s power elite, Walter Winchell, Red Skelton, Emil Coleman (a musician, like Coleman overpraised by the author), Gary “Coop” Cooper, Lana Turner, and — one name is real fame — Gable, Carson, Lassie. Perhaps intimidated by that horrendous harridan in the hat, Hedda Hopper, Bemelmans carefully refers to her as “the famous columnist and oracle,” sidestepping as he always does the opportunity to fling something really nasty at even a deserving target. He’s gentle. The jacket blurb has him saying: “The characters in this novel are fictitious, and any resemblance to living persons or pigs is pure coincidence.” Living persons with a vicious, vengeful streak, like Hedda Hopper, are most certainly spared satire. Satirizing nasty people can be dangerous!

Still, satire does have to have some connection and correction intended *vis à vis* society, even if the book is not to be reality thinly disguised, like **Valley of the Dolls** or **The Big Knife**. Whether one is able to connect the characters in **Dirty Eddie** and the events is a matter to be examined elsewhere, if (at this stage) at all. But here we can stress that the nature of real-life Hollywood played into the hands of the commentator on its foibles and the admixture of real names with invented ones allows Bemelmans to score points in the fiction and to make the whole fantasy that much more convincing and effective. On nearly every page of **Dirty Eddie** the writer of comedy can learn a trick or two of mastering names, which is justification enough for discussing here a novel which you probably have not already read.

“Moses Fable,” for instance, shows the bearer is leading his people into The Promised Land but also assimilation in America, his family having made money in New York department stores. (Otherwise his sister Irma would still “be slicing salami at the schtickle-for-a-nickle joint.”)

Throughout the novel, whether a woman is named Adrienne or Henrietta, Bemelmans is right on target as to age or origin. When a trivial starlet is mentioned — Cassard asks Moses Fable, “What’s her name?” — the dismissive reply is “Laura, Lena, Lorna, something like that.” When Cassard is flying high and tipping big, the doorman at Romanoff’s (a restaurant run by some New York Jew who pretends to be a Russian Prince, but Hollywood has always loved *chutzpah*) asks, “And how are you today, Mr. Cassard?” When he hits the skids, he’s lucky to get a curt “hello.” When someone hears *Nightwine*, he says, “What a perfect name!” When Belinda mentions poinsettias, Cassard says, “Don’t tell me the name ... I detest them — they look like handkerchiefs in which people have had a nosebleed.”

A few of the jokes are dated now, but that’s the price comedy always pays for the easy laugh that greets the contemporary reference. Some of the references were probably always caviare to the general, but those little touches do not get in the way if you don’t get them and they do keep the wittier readers on their toes and permit them to feel superior when they catch the message. One of the obscure allusions now is that in which the *rue Blondel* in Paris is mentioned, though it’s clear enough in context. But why, we ask, was a cocktail made of grapefruit juice, gin and cointreau “served very, very cold” once called a “Lady Mendl Special”? Today hardly anyone recalls Lady Mendl, a society decorator who, in addition to hiding her inability to cope with colors by pushing black-and-white schemes, thrust symphonies in beige on the Sweet Young Things of that bygone era.

Far more obvious at any time is the onomastic principle by which Belinda names the pig Dirty Eddie. Oddly, the pig is not knocked down by Cassard’s car or picked up to be a star in the movies until the novel is well advanced toward its conclusion. By this time people may well have been expecting that the title was a warning that in the concluding sections — chapters being perhaps too precise a term for this very unstructured performance — some “dirty Eddie” of a gangster, from Belinda’s Chicago, would appear for the *deus ex machina* of some startling conclusion. But no, Dirty Eddie is a black piglet and he starts with Belinda, who, as Cassard says, is “a girl from Chicago [who] plays a girl from Chicago. That, alors, is a miracle!”

The piglet gets a seven-year contract to star at \$5000 a week, unstoppable even by *force majeure* or acts of God or the movie unions, much to the profit of Mr. Weatherbeat, his owner. That farmer is called “Mr. Farmer” by Vanya when he cannot recall the name but he comes to have to coddle Mr. Weatherbeat when the piglet becomes a hot property, as they say in show biz. Dirty Eddie (“what a ham!”) becomes the “personality pig.” He saves the day. Cassard and Belinda marry; boy gets girl. Mumm goes quietly back to New York. Betsy Allbright, the silent star, goes on with her Command Performance dinner parties at which her friends have to listen to her reminiscences of the old days and drink Betsy’s *Sonny Boy* (a poisonous California claret some pompous fool mistakes for a Château Lafite) or “the special Santa Monica brandy from Thrifty’s,” where the nameless brand and the cheaply-named source tell the whole story.

The common people like the John and Marge and Jack and Mary and Bob we hear about one time on a party line are left to one side. Their purpose was simply to people the cinemas every time the program changed, and so they did in those days, making those the fat years of Hollywood, a time when all the waste and folly chronicled here did not have to face bottom-line taskmasters, meticulous accountants, and captious critics.

That Hollywood of **Dirty Eddie** was a crazier but a more colorful place than any place where big-budget movies are made today. The tone the names create is a light-hearted one, and apt. The novel did not deal in drive, drugs, and despair. It touched only very lightly on the Communists that were to lead to the House UnAmerican Activities investigations, on blacklisting and betrayal. It took only a glancing swipe at the dismal army-life/army-wife world of tacky Boonton, a wartime military establishment to which an impetuous first marriage briefly exiles the girl who is soon to emerge as Belinda the star. Bemelmans pokes very slight fun at this, moves on to more amusing things, prefers to ignore the realistic and sad novel that is inherent in that situation for the funny novel of glamorous people who wear “Tabu, the forbidden fragrance.” Seriousness is forbidden for a while. As Dennis Calhoun keeps his pornographic book **Call House** locked up, so the secrets of his dark soul are left locked up as well. If Betsy Allbright, aging beauty, is a trifle tragic, that is passed over; she appears as jovial, not defeated. **Dirty Eddie** was designed to be a funny book, not an important exposé, and it is funny, not a scathing satire but a gentle joke, not a political polemic, not a sensational tearing of the painted veil. It is just Bemelmans’ own special brand of frothy, rollicking entertainment. Critics may say it misses a lot of opportunities to be better, but it is good enough.

**Dirty Eddie** achieves its entertainment very significantly from its clever use of names. Though Cassard may get names wrong — he even says “Jimmy run” when he means “gin rummy” — Bemelmans, artist with words, never gets names wrong. To see how he uses them is to see how even light-hearted use of names can create humor and make satirical points too. One important matter: the delight that the onomastic tricks yields manages to create between the reader and the writer a kind of complicity in having fun. That warm relationship enables the writer who has no deep convictions to get by without much of the high seriousness that true satire is so often said to demand. **Dirty Eddie** is a charming rather than an alarming book. It’s a romp that often resembles reportage. Bemelmans always said he had no imagination. At its wildest, we want to believe the story, in a way, and we love the characters.

In **Great Writers of the English Language: Novelists** (1979), I declared my opinion that “his delightful humor disarms criticism,” which was rather a sneaky way of handling that critical assignment and avoiding trying to explain what he was doing among the Great. Bemelmans himself, I think, would have enjoyed that deviousness. This time, in onomastic criticism, I feel I have actually come to grips with what he does in a neglected but amusing book, a dated and not altogether well-constructed one but one in which he shows still another thing that names can do in fiction, which is to pull off a kind of magic trick for which names provide both the distracting patter and the rabbit in the hat.

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I have written elsewhere of how more serious writers have used names more cuttlingly in satire. Here I have briefly discussed Bemelmans' more cavalier attitude, because in the earnest Thirties and Forties they not only said "Sing me a song of social significance" but were singing:

Life is just a bowl of cherries.  
Don't take it serious.  
Life's too mysterious....

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